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**PRUSSIAN REFORM: THE  
RECOVERY OF A NATION**

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Napoleon's defeat of the Prussian army at Jena and Auerstadt in October of 1806 ruptured the traditional Germanic hegemony that had long held sway over the balance of power among the German states and northern Europe. The reputation of the army and the strength of the Prussian nation, born out of the victories of Frederick the Great, completely collapsed in one short day of battle.<sup>1</sup> Overcoming the devastation of defeat, the Prussian king and his newly appointed military reformers implemented a comprehensive restructuring of the army that transformed not just the leadership, but also the recruitment, organizational structure and tactics of the once-vaunted Frederician army. While individual reforms varied in effectiveness, in their totality, the efforts of Prussia would directly lead to victory in 1813 over the French and the eventual victories of the entire Allied coalition.

The catastrophic defeat of the Prussian army and its disgraceful retreat from Jena and Auerstadt drove a revolution of the nation's defense and the army. The defeats should not have been as shocking to the Prussian nobility and generals as they were. The seeds had been sown under a monarchy that allowed economic concerns and international affairs to detrimentally influence the readiness and capability of the army developed under Frederick the Great. Napoleon simply reaped the results of decades of failure on the part of Prussia's leadership. While Frederick III's timidity and indecisiveness were central to this failure, his collapse of leadership can best be described as a disassociation with the army and an ignorance of the system he administered. The power of the monarchy had traditionally rested on the loyalty and the privileges that had been provided to the Junkers officers. These men, in return, were able to guarantee the obedience of the peasant soldiers, mercenary forces and the working classes who generated wealth for the throne.<sup>2</sup> Due to the fact that Prussia rarely relied on any centralized control over its officers corps, the nation remained an uncoordinated patchwork of territories

under these officers with little coordination or influence on army policy.<sup>3</sup> While these officers were regionally focused, a centralized control of operations and a monopoly on army policy begun under Frederick the Great continued through Frederick III.<sup>4</sup> With Frederick's singular control of army policy decisions, the officer corps had gradually increased its disassociation with the crown and an already regionalized Prussian state became progressively more fractured and less prepared for any future conflict. This absolute and historic reliance on the primacy of the monarchy in policy effectively erased the political power of the Prussian nobility and the influence of the army leadership in affairs of internal policy and procedures. The aristocratic Junkers officers corps, displaced from policy by the crown, directly contributed to the weakness of the army. It was in the defeats of 1806 that the combination of all the weaknesses within the Prussian absolutist system, but especially those within the army, became readily apparent.<sup>5</sup>

If the throne and the position of monarch were outside the realm of any reform efforts, very little else within the Prussian army was safe from change after the destruction at Auerstadt. In early 1807, Frederick placed Gebhard von Scharnhorst as the President of a Military Reorganization Commission comprised of both older, senior officers and a more modern reformist school of representatives.<sup>6</sup> Scharnhorst and men like Gneisenau and Massenbach had made earlier efforts to introduce limited military reforms within the Prussian ranks but the majority of the nobility and Prussian aristocracy would not be swayed from the Frederician traditions.<sup>7</sup> With the defeats, the king was now more than willing to set aside the traditions of his predecessors and the desires of his court. To Scharnhorst and the reformers, any real change would need to address what they saw as fundamental flaws of the Prussian system of leading, organizing and training an effective army. They also knew the task that lay before them would not be easy - a significant alteration to the Frederician traditions along the lines of the changes

the French had implemented could be viewed as the equivalent to a democratization of the army as well as a devaluation of nobility.<sup>8</sup> Frederick understood the extent of needed reforms and the defeat of his army had been the defeat of his throne. The efforts of men like Scharnhorst and Gneisenau would have his full backing to restore the legitimacy of the army even though most of their efforts were regarded as impractical military theory by many within the older officer corps.<sup>9</sup> While the efforts of the reformers provoked much opposition from some of the older, more traditional senior members of the army, the king was staunchly behind them in the majority of the changes they led.<sup>10</sup>

The status of the Prussian traditionalists and senior army leaders were first on the reformer's and the king's lists of needed changes. Public outrage over the army's conduct and defeat promised little clemency for the responsible commanders.<sup>11</sup> While the tragedy had highlighted numerous, critical deficiencies within the organization and training of the army, it was the failure of Prussian senior officers which should have been most apparent to any observer of the battles of 1806.<sup>12</sup> The primary flaw within the army leadership was simply its age and its adherence to the appearance of Prussian invincibility based on past victory. While the king and his close group of advisors publicly assumed a share of the blame for the failure, it was the marshals and generals that the nation directed its attention towards in calls for dismissal and reform. Throughout the senior ranks, age and a desire to cling to the traditions of earlier times held sway. The army was led by a group of men who were well past their prime and at their core was a contingent who had served fifty years ago during the Seven Years' War.<sup>13</sup> Among the 142 generals, 77 were over the age of 60.<sup>14</sup> Age was not only a detriment within the senior leadership but also at the regiment, battalion and company level as well. In the infantry alone, 28 of the 66 colonels commanding line units were over 60 years of age and 276 of the 281 majors

were over 50 years old.<sup>15</sup> The senior Prussian officers, either from the nobility or the landed Junkers, had failed to produce trained, competent military leaders. Their self-absorbed desire for position within the king's court and their own financial security overshadowed any true concern for national defense. At Jena and Auerstadt, the Prussian regimental commanders lacked the ability to effectively react or issue timely orders in such a manner so as to prevent the defeat of their forces. The senior commanders, due primarily to their age and their reliance on outdated tactics, were simply unused to the pounding pace of Napoleon's way of war.<sup>16</sup> With both political and physical weakness, the Prussian officer corps had become closely mirrored in the fighting ability of the their army.<sup>17</sup>

With the failure of his noble and aristocratic commanders, the king was now more than willing to allow a reformation to take place within the army's sacred hierarchy. To remove the disgrace of having failed the country as well as to regain the confidence of the king, both the senior officer corps and the Commission reformers purged their most senior members, including 100 general officers.<sup>18</sup> The effect of the removal was twofold: it significantly cut away much of the deadweight of the old aristocratic officer corps and it allowed more junior officers and advocates of reform to be promoted to the higher ranks. As important as the sacking of these older generals, was the need for an improvement in the skill and performance of any future officers. Scharnhorst recognized that the nobility had never been known for their professional talents or enthusiasm in improving their military proficiency or knowledge.<sup>19</sup> In 1808, a new law was passed that opened the officer corps to all classes of the population, effectively ending the longstanding aristocratic hold on the majority of the officer positions.<sup>20</sup> Opening the corps to the middle class of non-noble Prussians with its engineers, merchants, and managers capitalized on the benefits of educated men who knew how to organize and operate systems and processes. The

reformers also believed that the infusion of new blood could break the legacy of the traditionalist military views and that these new officers would be better developed through professional education. Before 1806, the formal schooling for officers had been uncoordinated, disorganized and viewed as very technical in nature.<sup>21</sup> To support an improvement in broader educational efforts as well as to make an early determination on officer candidate potential, an examination system was developed for all entrance commissions as well as qualification to any advancement or promotion.<sup>22</sup> Additionally in 1810, the reformers convinced the king to invest, reinvigorate and standardize the military schools for the training of these new officers and establish the Officers War College for senior leader development.<sup>23</sup> The efforts of the reformers rested on their primary desire that the commanding generals of future conflicts would be unaffected by the indecisiveness and the failure of nerve which had crippled the senior leaders of 1806.<sup>24</sup> While army leadership may have ultimately caused the failures and defeat against Napoleon, the Commission was dedicated to ensuring that Prussian officers would never again take the field of battle aged beyond ability, stagnant in their fervor or untrained in command.

With a change to leadership and a more rigid process of developing new officers, the Commission's attention soon turned to the ways and means that the army had traditionally relied on manpower. Prussia had been one of the first European states to introduce any form of nationalized compulsory military service for its subjects. Established in 1733, the Prussian cantonal system had nominally assured the line army of a large, trained reserve of citizen soldiers which could be mobilized quickly in time of crisis.<sup>25</sup> Drawing a predetermined number of recruits from each canton, the army could reasonably expect a stable and predictable flow of men to augment the regular regiments. The origin of the size of the Prussian army and the methods to man it had been born out of Frederick the Great's need for greater Prussian influence among the



scores of fractured German states and principalities. It had been the aim of the cantonal system to establish a means by which the nation could support a large army that was well out of proportion to her corresponding territory and population thus allowing her more authority and voice within the councils of Europe.<sup>26</sup> The cantonal system had truly been an innovation in its original form but under the domestic policies of both Frederick William II and III, it had fallen into a state of disrepair through the expansion of exempted classes and an increased reliance on mercenary recruitment. From an economic perspective, the cantonal system also imposed a severe strain on the working peasantry who manifested their unwillingness to serve by increased rates of desertion.<sup>27</sup> As war loomed across the continent in the late eighteenth century and rates of desertion continued to rise, plans for expanded recruitment were never carried out due to the economic concerns that cantonal enforcement would entail. Apathy on the part of Frederick III and an unwillingness of the nobility to eliminate the expansion of any of the exempted classes in favor of economic stability doomed the army.<sup>28</sup> All calls for enforcement of the cantonal requirements from younger military leaders went mostly unheeded but the catastrophe of 1806 changed the tides in favor of reform.

French supremacy and the occupation of Prussia provided the natural impetus for the reform of the cantonal system and its traditional reliance on mercenary recruiting.<sup>29</sup> Over time, the reliance and demand for mercenaries had unintentionally created a significant obstacle for any attempted nationalization of the army.<sup>30</sup> The use of foreign mercenaries had theoretically strengthened the domestic economy of Prussia and her vassal states by allowing merchants and farmers to continue in their trades. To maintain economic tranquility with the nobles, the government had made up for the exemptions in manpower deficiencies by extensive recruitment of professional, foreign mercenaries.<sup>31</sup> While mercenaries nominally filled up the

rolls of the regimental system, the evolution to a reliance on their use transformed what had once been the most nationalistic army on the continent to one where loyalty to the monarch had become nominally tied to and dependent upon the strength of the treasury. As a result, mercenary forces comprised almost half of the Prussian army by 1804.<sup>32</sup> Prussia had become a nation with an army built neither on the morality of national compulsory service or on any patriotic, voluntary commitment of its citizenry.<sup>33</sup>

Mercenaries were seen by the reformers as a critical impediment to restoring an army whose first priority was the defense of the nation. Scharnhorst had long criticized the use of these mercenaries and had advocated the establishment of a national army through the abolishment of all foreign recruiting efforts.<sup>34</sup> While reliance on mercenaries had certainly augmented the Prussian ranks, their presence and the monarch's reliance on them had also diluted any possibility of the German people to feel a need to participate in the nation's defense. The reformers correctly claimed that mercenary soldiers would never provide the fervor and passion towards the Prussian state that would be required for any eventual national liberation against the French occupiers. France itself had provided the model of an army with few social distinctions and an army reliant on patriotic zeal. The shame of defeat now enabled Prussia's mimicking of the Napoleonic model.<sup>35</sup> With the approval of the king, the army began eliminating mercenary positions and allowing individual service contracts to be voided. The disbanding not only met the reformer's ultimate goal of re-nationalizing the army but it also quickly allowed Prussia to meet French treaty terms concerning army manpower limitations without requiring the dissolution of a number of native Prussian line units. With the mercenaries gone from the ranks, the task for the Commission now became the expansion of an army limited by treaty mandates.

While a divorce from a reliance on mercenaries might add a patriotic fervor to the army, the issue of rapidly raising sufficient native forces was of far greater concern to Commission reformers. The treaty signed with France in 1808 had limited the Prussian army to 42,000 men but even this small number presented a dilemma for reform efforts.<sup>36</sup> In the years immediately following Jena and Auerstadt, domestic constraints and the economic concerns of the defeated Prussian monarchy had allowed the army to downsize and deteriorate even further for fear of any reprisal by the occupying French. The regular line army was initially decreased to the size of a corps and in 1810 its strength was still at a nominal 20,000 men.<sup>37</sup> The final impetus for full mobilization against the terms of the treaty was the continued French intrusion into Prussian military affairs as Napoleon sought to reinforce his position against Russia and Austria through the use of Prussian fortresses and garrisons. In addition to the shame of submission to French occupation, the reformers were equally aware that any increase in the size of the army would have to be acceptable to the nobility and sustainable for commoners. Scharnhorst and the Commission, devising a wholly new system to satisfy all parties, believed that it was imperative to national defense that every Prussian citizen view service in the army as both a duty and privilege.<sup>38</sup>

To increase the army under the French occupation, a system was devised that concealed military service under the appearance of a separate, civilian army that would enlist eligible citizens – the Prussian Landwehr.<sup>39</sup> The stated intent of this militia force would be to supplement the regular army, maintain the close ties to a soldier's home or province and recruit true citizens for defense of the nation. Service obligations were nominally limited to three years, corporal punishment was completely abolished and the burden of national conscription now fell on an entire, unexempted population.<sup>40</sup> The newly formed Landwehr not only provided the

required numbers, its creation met the reformers more pressing concern of patriotism as well. The Landwehr became the singular focus of the nation's patriotic feelings and provided the Prussian people, to whom the line army had ever offered little attraction, with the opportunity to personally claim a stake in the defense of their lands.<sup>41</sup> The first calls for full mobilization of both the regular army and Landwehr went out in early 1813 after the French retreats from the Russian campaigns of 1812. Although the actual number of men trained under this new system was small before 1813, the personnel that did receive training were critical to the forming of a cadre to receive the eventual mobilized mass of conscripts.<sup>42</sup> The combination of full-scale activation of the Landwehr and the progressive buildup of the regular army provided both the necessary means to reenter the conflict on the allied side as well as the ability of the army to maintain a non-mercenary composition. In 1813, 120,000 of the 280,000 Prussian troops that marched in support of the Leipzig campaign and beyond were from the Landwehr - an augmentation that the nation would not have possessed except for the concerted efforts of the reformers.<sup>43</sup>

While improvements to officer corps and recruitment would certainly improve the army's direction and strength, failures in Prussian army organization and formations had been all too apparent in the defeats to the French. The opposing French corps system had proved that it possessed unmatched maneuver on the battlefield. The French revolutionary formations were not just bigger and more maneuverable, but were also of a different quality than the traditional Prussian regiments.<sup>44</sup> Napoleon's corps consisted of much larger formations with the inherent ability to fight independently while incorporating all three branches of arms and used "synthesized tactics out of elements that were already present" on the battlefield.<sup>45</sup> French divisions and corps, with their integrated staff systems, were more responsive to commands

allowing French commanders the ability to use combinations of forces that were beyond the abilities of even the most gifted and talented Prussian generals of the day.<sup>46</sup> Both operationally and tactically, the Prussian army had found itself outmatched by Napoleon's superiority in command and organization. Where the French moved independently and with a sense of purpose, the infantry of Prussia was a much slower and more plodding machine."<sup>47</sup> Prussian armies had maintained the traditionally slow pace of exact formations and elaborate maneuvers of the parade ground. The traditional Prussian army, consisting of a general and his assigned regiments, did not have the ability to fight with or as part of a higher echelon combined arms formation.<sup>48</sup> The Prussian regiments mobilized in 1806 were either line or light infantry, heavy or light cavalry and artillery batteries wholly dependent on other regionalized regiments for any nominal combined arms effect or support.<sup>49</sup> Strict control was required to keep formations together and freedom of action by each regimental commander was restricted based on the limited composition and degree of loyalty of their assigned force. While the Prussians constituted a fine army on the parade ground, in the field they represented an obsolete tradition.<sup>50</sup>

Reformation of the composition and recruitment of the force had been one of Scharnhorst's most difficult tasks due to the inflexibility of the aristocracy, but he and his fellow reformers knew that any change to the traditional organizational structure presented the greatest difficulty. The nobility and regimental commanders, long independent of oversight, felt any centralized interference was an attempt to usurp their direct authority within each canton. To the Commission, it was precisely this authoritarian and local control of the regiments that had made the army incapable of any coordinated action.<sup>51</sup> Change was needed to free maneuver units from the reliance on traditional methods of warfare and to evolve the army into a more effective combined arms organizations such as the French corps. The reform that had the most impact

was the incorporation of the independent regiments into regional divisions that would combine infantry, artillery and cavalry.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the brigade organization was introduced after 1808 and further enabled infantry and cavalry units to train together on a more local level and to become more accustomed to the kind of coordination that had been previously absent.<sup>53</sup> Effective integration of the regionalized regiments into brigade and divisional formations also required significant changes to the doctrine and training of modern tactics. Traditional Frederician cavalry doctrine was replaced by the concept of the primacy of the infantry and the inherent need for cannon and horses to provide maximum support to the line in all campaign planning and operations.<sup>54</sup> Training techniques, taught at the newly formed military schools further bolstered the concepts of combined arms and independent divisional action. Concerted efforts were made to benefit from French operational practices and Prussian training manuals were written that focused on the use of light troops, the column battle formation and the cooperation and coordination of all branches of the army.<sup>55</sup> The traditional reliance on the constant drill of the parade field was replaced with field exercises, integrated staff problems, individual target practice and additional tactical training.<sup>56</sup> Although the Prussian army that would eventually face the French in 1813 was not fully proficient in the Napoleonic way of war, it was much sounder tactically and organizationally than its predecessor of 1806.

Changes to the Prussian force structure also required a development and institutional overhaul to the command and control system to effectively employ the force. The tradition of absolute supremacy in the orders of the monarch had significantly compounded operational and tactical shortfalls in the execution of previous engagements against the French. Blucher and others had witnessed firsthand the apparent lack of unity and confusion among senior officers and the nobility during the battles of Jena and Auerstadt.<sup>57</sup> Although Napoleon similarly

commanded with a singular authority, he implemented orders through a synchronized, supporting staff system. The French staffs, at both corps and division levels, gave the revolutionary army a command system far superior to any other European army's method of operational control.<sup>58</sup> Prussia had no such staff system below that of the General Staff and had long relied simply on strategic decisions passed from the king that were intended to shape the operational objectives of the senior officer or regimental commander in the field. Upon the mobilization in 1806, the few officers who had been assigned to the General Staff in Berlin had simply been apportioned out to the armies with limited operational field staff training.<sup>59</sup> Other than a limited use of the Chief of Staff position, the lack of any staff in field commands resulted in a need for lengthy war councils made up of senior commanders, nobility and occasionally, the king himself. These councils made the army dependent on the deciphering of lengthy orders detailing movements often down to the company level. Valuable time was routinely lost in the production and dissemination of orders and they were often useless and inaccurate based on changes to the operational or tactical situation the receiving commander faced.<sup>60</sup> After Auerstadt, a lack of intent from the Prussian war council had left any potential for reorganization of forces for either continued offensive or defensive operations in doubt due to a lack of simple orders.<sup>61</sup> What had seemed a grand Prussian tradition of the sole authority and voice of the king leading the army in battle did not translate well amidst the fog of war on the fast moving Napoleonic battlefield.

Scharnhorst and the Commission were well aware that the traditional General Staff would be insufficient for any future war against France. The staff, since its establishment in 1640, had been linked to a small number of noble families vying for position in the close circle around the king who were far less concerned with the army than with general affairs of the state.<sup>62</sup> Now

with the authority of the somewhat reluctant monarch, the reformers began to create a system of military education to develop trained with practical experience. Although the nobles and Junkers initially balked at any new training requirement, their reluctance that officer reforms would erode the authority of the nobility were simply dismissed.<sup>63</sup> In the interwar years of 1807 to 1813, the shortfall in command and control and the subsequent lessons learned were fully integrated in the classrooms of Scharnhorst's schools. Graduates and veterans of the General Staff and schools were posted to the field staffs overseeing the integration, operation and training of the newly-formed brigades and divisions.<sup>64</sup> Curriculum and doctrine were centralized and integrated into the military's educational system with a Central Office for Military Education created under the General Staff to oversee all aspects of training and development of both line officers and staffs.<sup>65</sup> Through these reform efforts, never again would the nation rely on a single marshal or monarch to act as their own chief of staff in the field. While leadership may have failed the nation in 1806, Scharnhorst had realized that the stakes of total war were too high for the nation to depend on the uneducated decisions of a single soldier.

The true effectiveness of Prussian reform efforts and their impact to the campaigns of 1813 and beyond are difficult to quantify when taken individually as described above. The Commission's efforts were hindered on multiple fronts – from both within the Prussian nobility and aristocracy as well as under the French occupiers. The sweeping removal of older officers and commanders, while immediate for some, ultimately were of only limited value to the officer corps as a whole. By 1813, over half the officers who had served in 1806 were still in the service and many of the officers who had been present at the defeats of Jena and Auerstadt were in the field at Leipzig.<sup>66</sup> The training reforms that the Commission had engineered had only minor and piecemeal benefit to the army that took the field in 1813. Before 1812, although attendance at



the schools had increased, no tactical training manuals had yet to appear nor had the new system of schools been capable of graduating a sufficient number of officers to have any serious effect on operational issues.<sup>67</sup> Conscription efforts under Scharnhorst's Landwehr model were slow in significantly tapping into the nation's true potential for army manpower. It took a combination of a general French withdrawal, an alliance with Russia and a direct appeal for war by Frederick to the people before citizens earnestly began to fill the army ranks.<sup>68</sup> While the full reorganization of the army into the planned divisional concept was preempted by the oncoming war, Scharnhorst's efforts at the brigade system were somewhat effective and the experience gained by officers commanding larger formations of infantry, cavalry and artillery was readily apparent in the future conflict.<sup>69</sup> To be truly effective on an individual basis, the reforms had needed more time to embed themselves into the fabric of the army and nation but continental events preempted that luxury.

It is more appropriate to analyze the whole body of work of the Commission to better understand the effectiveness and impact of its efforts. In seclusion, each individual effort varied in effectiveness due largely to the limited time that had been available for implementation or by the traditional Prussian unwillingness to change. War was upon Prussia once again and without a formidable army, any recovery of the nation from defeat would have been impossible.<sup>70</sup> By 1813, a recovered Prussia was again able to take the field as part of the allied coalition. Where Jena and Auerstadt had highlighted the failures of the Prussian traditions, the Leipzig campaign would similarly highlight the early efforts of reform. Of prime concern to many of the reformers had been the overarching failure of leadership that had sought to induce obedience in its officers and soldiers through force and the sole authority of the crown. The new Prussian methods now looked to obedience through respect for competent leadership and true patriotism for the

nation.<sup>71</sup> A reorganized and restructured army that could bring to bear the full complement of their combined arms ability under the auspices of nationalism would prove to be the difference between results of 1806 and those of 1813 and beyond. In this regard, the Commission had been successful. Determined to overcome the methodology and obstacles of Prussian history, Scharnhorst and his Commission had successfully demonstrated the validity of their ideas. Ultimately, the contribution that their reforms made to the nation directly led to the eventual defeat of a revolutionary, Napoleonic France and anchored Prussia's position as a continental power once again.<sup>72</sup>



## NOTES

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60. Petre, *Napoleon's Conquest of Prussia*, 38.
61. Citino, *German Way of War*, 114.
62. Goerlitz, *History of German General Staff*, 2.
63. Kitchen, *Military History of Germany*, 34.
64. Goerlitz, *History of German General Staff*, 34.
65. Ibid, 36.
66. Shanahan, *Prussian Military Reforms*, 108.
67. Ibid, 232.
68. Ibid, 202.
69. Ibid, 232.

70. Ibid, 103.

71. F. Loraine Petre, *Napoleon's Last Campaign in Germany, 1813*. (London: Greenhill Books, 1992), 22.



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